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The life and rule of St. Benedict

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THE LIFE AND RULE OF ST. BENEDICT

Their Influence on Christian Civilization in Western Europe

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Saint Benedict is regarded by most figures of the Middle Ages, and by historians and monks of the modern world, as the patriarch and founder of all institutes of Western monasticism. His fame and place in Christian history, however, are due solely to his short work, The Rule of Saint Benedict. No life could be more remote from the turbulence of the sixth century, and no individual could appear less likely to contribute to the development of modern Europe. Yet Benedict's achievements were so influential that the centuries after his death (600-1200 A.D.) were known collectively as the Benedictine Age. "The institute which he founded became a tremendous force in Church and State, converting, civilizing, unifying the peoples of Christendom, and containing within itself the social pattern of the new age."[1]

Benedict's basic premise was to form a community of monks bound to live together until death in the monastery of their profession, under common rule as a religious family, and leading a life not of extreme austerity, but devoted to the service of God. Their "service" consisted of the "community act of celebration of the divine office and ordered daily manual labor and religious reading, according to the Rule and under obedience to the abbot."[2] Benedict's monastery was not to be a penitentiary or a "school for ascetic mountaineering"--it was simply a family and a home for those seeking God.[3]

In this paper, I would like to explore the changes in early Western monasticism which occurred due to the work of St. Benedict. This study will include sections on:

1. Early Eastern monastic practice prior to the Rule;
2. The life of St. Benedict and how it influenced the later composition of the Rule:
3. The most important aspects of the Rule itself; and,
4. Life at Monte Cassino during Benedict's tenure as abbot.

When doing research on the life of Benedict, the major problem is a lack of primary source materials. Surprisingly enough, there are only two, The Rule of Saint Benedict, and book II of the Dialogues of Gregory the Great, neither of which is truly a biographical work. Benedict's work was simply a codification of those rules which, when followed properly, would bring men together in a peaceful Christian oasis in the midst of a weakening barbaric social structure. There is no biographical material included in the Rule, but it can be used as a mirror in which Benedict's saintliness is reflected.[4]

On the other hand, we have the Dialogues of Gregory. Book II, which deals only with Benedict, has been greatly criticized by historians because the author left out many significant facts about the saint, and only hinted at others. However, Gregory's purpose was not to retell Benedict's life; his aim was to record the miracles of sixth-century saints for the edification of his readers. Book II of the Dialogues contains thirty-eight short chapters on various miracles performed by Benedict. Gregory is the narrator and Peter acts as interlocutor, giving leading questions and offering various difficulties for solution.[5]

Gregory probably never met Benedict since there is no mention of it in the Dialogues; however, he did interrogate several first-hand witnesses to Benedictine miracles:

> I was unable to learn about all his miraculous deeds. But the few that I am going to relate I know from the lips of four of his disciples: Constantine, the holy man who succeeded him as abbot; Valentinian, for many years superior of the monastery at the Lateran; Simplicius, Benedict's second successor; and Honoratus, who is still abbot of the monastery where the man of God first lived.
>
> Dialogue II, Prologue [6]

The Dialogues were not written in an age known for its scientific history. The age was a credulous one, and the legends which grew up around holy men were accepted with a simple naïvety. Granted, perhaps Gregory may have forgotten to add many external details, however, it is the accounting of Benedict's spiritual qualities which is the most significant premise and the basic purpose behind writing the book.[7]

When dealing with the miracles of the saints, it must first be decided if one is going to truly believe them as they are written. The researcher's frame of mind toward the miraculous will be more than evident in the tone of the paper. Unless one wishes to be rather hypocritical about his/her Christian faith, I believe that we must accept these miracles as we find them. To declare that one believes that Christ fed the multitudes with a few loaves and fishes or that He made the blind see and the crippled walk, and then to turn around and mock the miracles of Benedict, leaves that individual wide open to attack. Miracles are a sign of God's love and affection for his creations and while they are bestowed only upon certain holy men and women, they are actually for the good of all humanity. The Gospels

offer just as many stories of questionable events--part of Christian belief is the faith we must have in order to believe the Bible and the writings of the Holy Fathers, both of which contain incidents we have never seen and for which we have no historical proof.

In the early ages of Christianity, the concept of utility and purpose (other than perfecting the individual soul) did not seem to appear in monastic ideals. To some, the practice of a solitary life in the desert seemed the most satisfactory way of obtaining elevation of the soul. To others, it was the discipline of severe and sustained bodily labor; and to others again, it was the practice of "astonishing austerities of self-inflicted punishment, or of long and ever-increasing vocal prayers."[8]

The ascetic impulse, with varied conceptions of its importance, has always been present and vigorous in the monastic life of the Church. Some early monks did live within loosely-bound Christian communities, or in close juxtaposition to them. The few monasteries which did exist all followed the word of the Gospels by imitating Christ's celibacy, His self-denial, His poverty, and His abandonment of family, but they followed no uniform observance of these penitential acts.[9] Large numbers also sought a life of total seclusion and renunciation as hermits in the Egyptian desert around Alexandria. As many became disillusioned with the solitary or eremetic life, the communal or cenobitic form came to have greater appeal. Pachomius (circa 346) had the first rule for communal monastic establishment, but that of St. Basil (326-379) gained the widest acceptance in the East.[10] Under Basil's Rule, all religious and ascetic exercises were put under the control of a superior in the community; it can be seen here how Basil's work would be influential later in Benedict's Rule.

Nevertheless, despite St. Basil's popularity, strict asceticism did continue and the eremetic life found its way into Western Europe between the years 300 and 475. Penance was

still one of the principal objectives of Eastern monastic practice, and it continued to have the same importance in the West. Eastern monks had practiced the severest regimes of fasting, watching, nakedness, silence, and self-inflicted chastisement, all combined with the extreme climatic factors of the desert.[11] The dangers of adapting Eastern ideals to Western areas are obvious. A method of life which may have suited the people of Egypt was found to be totally unsuitable to Western Europe (Italy and Gaul) where climatic conditions and the wild terrain rendered such practices extremely difficult, totally impractical, and even deadly in some cases. As Western monks found quasi-Eastern eremetic practices to be unsuitable, the method of life became a hinderance rather than a help to obtaining purity and total charity.[12]

By the end of the fourth century, Western monasticism was losing its individualistic spiritual approach, and was becoming increasingly competitive. Monks would rival each other in achieving the most severe degrees of austerity. For example, if one said he would eat only dried fruit during Lent, another would say he would only eat the same dried fruit every three days rather than daily. If one said he would sleep only several hours a night, the other would attempt to forego all sleep completely for a certain period of time. By the time Benedict began writing the Rule, due to the unsuitability of Eastern practices in Italy and Gaul, monasticism in the West was headed into general decline. (This is not the case however with Ireland, where the monastic ideals were flourishing under the direction of St. Patrick.)[13]

As will be seen in the Rule, St. Benedict tempered

austerity with common sense, moderation, and simplicity. He did not want to destroy the senses as many eremetic monks sought to do, but only to control the senses so they would offer the least possible distraction to the soul. Benedict viewed excessive mortification to be just as harmful as excessive indulgence. Penance would remain important in Benedictine life as only one of the means to the ultimate end, not as the prime motivating factor.[14]

> There was a man of saintly life; blessed Benedict was his name, and he was blessed also with God's grace. Even in his boyhood he showed mature understanding, for he kept his heart detached from every pleasure with a strength of character far beyond his years. While still living in the world, free to enjoy its early advantages, he saw how barren it was with its attractions and turned from it without regret.
>
> Dialogue II, Prologue

The name Benedict, or Benedictus, means "blessed," and perhaps the name "was given by Providence to him who was destined to become one of the most holy glories of the church," and patriarch of Western monasticism. St. Benedict's life was cast in a stormy period of transition. Four years before his birth in 480, the boy emperor Romulus was deposed by the barbarian Odoacer, signalling the traditional "fall of the Roman Empire." The saint died in 547, during a war that left Italy open to the worst of the Teutonic invasions, those of the Lombards. His lifespan saw the end of the classical period and the beginning of the middle ages, as well as the destruction of society brought on by internal decay and external assault. It is amazing that so simple a man would develop something during this period that would have such a tremendously long-lasting effect on Western civilization.[15]

Due to the lack of primary source materials, there is considerable latitude for speculation concerning the events of Benedict's life. He was born in the Italian province of Nursia in 480 of "distinguished parentage" according to Gregory. His parents must have been fairly prosperous, considering that they would later send Benedict off to Rome, accompanied by a nurse, to further his education.[16]

During Benedict's childhood, Nursia was an active country bishopric, therefore he was probably brought up in a genuinely pious atmosphere.[17] Gregory stresses this point as he speaks of the young boy's serious nature and wisdom beyond his years. This Christian upbringing was combined with another aspect of Benedict's boyhood and would prove to be influential on the later writing of the Rule. This second aspect deals with patria potestas, the position of the father in the Roman family. Roman tradition invested the father with great power over his family--he was a stern but fair disciplinarian, and he commanded the obedience and respect of all family members. Benedict would later synthesize Roman family traditions with monastic culture;

1. The abbot took the position of father to his monks;
2. The monks were to show the highest obedience to the abbot, and he had strict disciplinarian rights in his powers, and was allowed to use them if this obedience was not accorded him; and,
3. The whole concept of the Benedictine monastery was to be that of a Christian family.[18]

At about the age of fifteen, Benedict was sent off to Rome to continue his secondary education. Rome was still a glorious cosmopolitan city, despite the failure of its government. While the barbarians had weakened Rome's vitality, they had not completely sapped it.[19] The splendors of classical Rome remained but Benedict evidently did not involve himself, fearing eternal damnation. Seeing many of his friends "falling headlong into vice" (Dialogue II, c. 1), Benedict decided to leave Rome with a general conviction that he must seek God in desert places, away from the distractions and temptations of the world. No doubt he came into contact with monks in Rome, but he decided

to lead an eremetic life in the wilderness of the Sabine Hills. "...[W]ell aware of his ignorance, yet wise, uneducated though he was..." (Dialogue II, Prologue), Benedict left Rome around the year 500, at the age of twenty.

At first, the young man was accompanied by his faithful nurse. It is here we learn of Benedict's first miracle in the town of Affile. The nurse had borrowed a sieve from a neighbor, and broke it shortly thereafter. Benedict, feeling sorry for the nurse, picked up the pieces of the sieve, and after fervent prayers, found that the sieve had been mended. He became the subject of great admiration in the area, but "preferring to suffer ill-treatment from the world rather than enjoy its praises" (Dialogue II, c. 1), he fled, alone, to Subiaco, an area forty miles outside Rome.

Subiaco was, for the most part, a wild and austere area in the Sabine Hills. Benedict found a secluded cavern located on a rocky mountainside, some 1000 feet above a gorge. There he would remain, in silent contemplation, for three years. During this time, the only person Benedict had contact with was a monk named Romanus. Romanus advised the young hermit on his activities, gave him a habit of animal skins, and brought him bread and water periodically. So intense was Benedict's concentration that Roman had to install a bell-like device to let Benedict know of the monk's presence (Dialogue II, c. 1). As he wandered along the mountainside in his animal skins, Benedict was often mistaken for a wild beast by neighboring peasants.

He was tempted severely during the three-year hermitage, and Gregory tells two stories on this subject. Once Benedict

attempted to break Romanus' bell and became extremely penitent because he had allowed himself to be vexed by a "trivial, external object." Benedict was also tormented by threats to his chastity. To cleanse himself, he would remove the animal hides and jump into a thorn bust, and by rolling in the bush, Benedict would match his illicit physical pleasure with true physical pain.[20]

This three-year period is obviously a contradiction to his later life: compare the animal-like young Benedict with a poised and dignified patriarch; compare the hermit who completely forgot the Easter celebration with the man responsible for a fruitful liturgical development; and finally, compare the austere "father of the desert" with the moderate father of a monastic community.[21] Benedict's life in the Subiaco cavern reversed his previous beliefs. He found that he had been saved from death only by the Grace of God, and that others could not simply plunge into the solitary life without first receiving guidance and training from "a society of religious brethren."[22] In other words, the hermit was a man who was already disposed toward the cenobitic life (Rule, c. 1).

Gregory explains how Benedict knew he was ready to leave his confinement:

> ....Now the sacred vessels are the souls of the faithful. God's chosen servants must therefore obey and serve, and tire themselves out with strenuous work as long as they are still subject to temptation. Only when full maturity has left them undisturbed by evil thoughts are they put in charge of the sacred vessels, for then they become teachers of souls.
>
> Dialogue II, c. 2.

Despite his retreat, word had spread of the holy man, and many disciples flocked to him for guidance. Amongst those were

monks from the nearby Vicovaro monastery. Their abbot had just recently died, and after much pleading they finally persuaded Benedict (against his better judgment) to come with them and serve as their new abbot. Once at Vicovaro, Benedict found there was much to reform and that the monks were not willing to cooperate. He continued to try to reform the monastery, yet the monks only became more disgruntled. Soon there developed a plot to poison the Abbot with a beaker of wine. Legend says that Benedict shattered the beaker with the sign of the cross, and surmising the plot, simply left the monastery and returned to his solitude. Gregory defends this action to Peter by saying:

> ...if he had tried to force them to remain under his rule, he might have forfeited his own fervor and peace of soul and even turned his eyes from the light of contemplation....When none of the members is devout enough to give any promise of good results, his efforts to help such a community will prove to be a serious mistake, especially if there are opportunities nearby to work more fruitfully for God.
>
> Dialogue II, c. 3

The incident at Vicovaro could possibly have taught Benedict to mingle "as little as possible in human association." Still the disciples continued to come and he finally decided to build an infant community in Subiaco for them. The community finally numbered twelve separate monasteries, each housing twelve monks and an abbot, and all recognized Benedict as a sort of abbot-general. He undertook the early training of all new disciples and taught them two duties; the primary duty was conducting the Holy Services, and the secondary one was manual labor and study.[23]

Membership of these early monasteries included men from all walks of life. "Though no doubt some were of the same station

of life as Saint Benedict himself, the great majority of them were recruited from the Italian peasantry or from the semi-barbarous Gothic invaders."[24] Although slaves were envisioned as members of the community, there still existed social regulations which kept them in their bound status outside the monastery.[25]

Benedict might never have left Subiaco for Monte Cassino had it not been for the jealousy of a local priest named Florentius. Florentius tried numerous ways to kill Benedict (the most famous of which is the poisoned bread incident), and even sent seven naked dancing women into the monastery to tempt the saint. When Benedict realized that this enmity was directed at him personally, fearing for the Subiaco community, he decided to leave and seek a new home. Florentius was gleeful about the departure and while enjoying both that and the sun on his balcony, the edifice fell and he was killed immediately.[26]

Benedict and a few select followers headed southeast of Subiaco and finally came to Monte Cassino (approximately eighty miles outside Rome) in 528 A.D. It was on top of this mountain, in the ruins of an old temple to Jupiter, that Benedict established his famous monastery. Both Benedict and his followers went through arduous hardships fighting the pagan spirits who remained around the temple. But with Benedict's faith and constant prayer, construction was finally completed (Dialogue II, c. 8-11). A description of Monte Cassino will be given later in the paper. Benedict would spend the rest of his life secure in his mountain abbey, leading a life of work and prayer, and governing his monks as abbot for fifteen years.

The life of Benedict at Subiaco and Monte Cassino involved

story after story of his miracles, prophesies, and "second-sight," all of which demonstrate the power and supreme importance of prayer in the saint's life. His prayers allowed the brothers to lift ten-ton rocks, enabled a monk to walk on water in order to rescue a drowning child, and completely healed a brother whose limbs were decapitated. He prophesied both the destruction of Monte Cassino (by the Lombards in 583), and his own death. He could tell when monks had broken their fasts, when a substitute was sent in place of a king as a test of his powers, and when the "words of the mouth" and the "meditations of the heart" of his monks were not one and the same.

Three aspects of Benedict's life, as it has been traced above, seem to be antitheses to the law of the Rule. This tends to make the work all the more remarkable since it represents a complete reversal of his own experiences. Benedict's probation in the cavern involved severe corporal mortifications yet the asceticism of the Rule is markedly moderate. His first years at Subiaco were spent in complete solitude, yet his monks sanctify themselves through community life. Benedict himself was never anything but a leader in his monasteries, yet he later exalts the virtue of obedience to a superior as the primary facet of monasticism.[29] His own personal experience with both the cenobitic and eremetic forms of monasticism would be the major basis on which the Rule was written.

> We are therefore now about to institute a school for the service of God, in which we hope nothing harsh or burdensome will be ordained. But if we proceed in certain things with some little severity, sound reasoning so advising for the amendment of vices or the preserving of charity, do not for fear of this forthwith flee from the way of salvation, which is always narrow in the beginning. In living our life, however, and by the growth of faith, when the heart has been enlarged, the path of God's commandments is run with unspeakable loving sweetness; so that never leaving His school, but persevering in the monastery until death in His teaching, we share by our patience in the sufferings of Christ, and so merit to be partakers of His kingdom.
>
> Rule, Prologue

> Indeed he composed a rule for the monks, remarkable for its discretion, and for the clearness of its language. If one desires to know more deeply his character and his life, one will find in the teachings of said rule all the acts of his government, because the holy man was not able to teach in a manner other than that which he himself practiced.
>
> Dialogue II, c. 36.

If length were a legitimate qualification for pronouncing a document as "earth-shattering," The Rule of Saint Benedict would not be included on anyone's list. The Rule is not a long work. It is divided into a Prologue and seventy-three chapters, some of which are no longer than a paragraph.

The Rule did not aim to teach a method, perfect an individual, or train that individual for a specific function--its purpose as stated above in the Prologue, was only to "institute a school for the service of God." The monastic life was only to be a means of achieving personal santification, not a "device to rejuvenate the world outside the monastery."[28] But the influence of the Rule went farther than that. As a code of laws it influenced an entire continent since most of the nations of Western Europe were "converted to the Christian faith and tutored inthe arts of peace" by monks such as Augustine,

Boniface, and Ansgar, all of whom were trained under the Rule of Benedict. It appeared as a "providential instrument of regeneration" when civil government and the Christian church seemed to be at their lowest ebb.[28]

The Rule owes its popularity and longevity to three characteristics:

1. It is extremely practical. While being short and concise, it serves as a "workable directory for all monastic activity and for every class and age of monks;"

2. While the Rule does not compromise on spiritual matters, it is moderate and flexible on the physical aspects of monastic life. The emphasis is on the simple life in common rather than the austere individualism of early Eastern practices; and,

3. It is a unique rule in comparison to all other previously written documents because, in a relatively small space, it offers directions and answers to both monk and abbot, concerning "all the vicissitudes of life."[29]

It appears to be almost revolutionary in comparison to its predecessors since it tempers austerity and holds the community to be more important than the individual--a moderate combination of Latin austerity and Graeco-Roman humanism.[30]

The suitability of the Rule is evident when contrasted to the time in which it was written. The empire was failing; the ancient world with urban life, rapid communication, and culture was about to disappear. In its place would be the medieval world, characterized by small, independent units. Unity, interdependence, and commerce would dwindle. The monastic system envisioned by Benedict was a blessing to this tumultuous period.[31] In the chaos of the age, the monastery under Benedict's guidance would turn from being simply a place of withdrawl to a center of

peaceful existence in the midst of barbaric culture. It would preserve and later diffuse the remainder of "ancient culture and spirituality." Even when all else broke apart, the monastery, "self-supporting and self-sufficient, would often remain."[32]

Dom Justin McCann, noted biographer of Benedict, divides The Rule up into various groups:

> After the Prologue, there come three chapters which characterize the form of life which he is instituting and provide its main constitution, in the chapter on the abbot, and the chapter on calling the brethren to Council. There follow four chapters of fundamental spiritual instruction (4-7). After that we have eleven chapters on the Divine Office (8-18), ending with one on the proper method of assisting at the office (19) and another on prayer in general (20). After two chapters (21-22) of particular ordinances (Deans and Sleep) we have a large section devoted to the methods of correcting faults (23-30), of which the legislator has more to say later (43-46). With chapter thirty-one, we resume particular ordinances for the life of the monastery (31-42, 47-57). The fifty-eighth chapter begins a section of the Rule which deals with admission into the monastery (58-61). Then we have chapters on the priests of the monastery, the order of the community, the appointment of the abbot, of the prior, and gatekeeper. The last seven chapters, which are considered to be later than the rest, deal with certain particular points, and the Rule ends with an exhortation to zeal.[33]

There is some question as to when the Rule was written and for whom. Most historians feel that Benedict completed the work toward the end of his life (circa 535) after nearly forty years of experience at Subiaco, Terrecina (another monastery Benedict is purported to have built), and Monte Cassino. Those historians who feel it was written during Benedict's tenure at Subiaco have trouble explaining how the Rule seems to pertain to one monastery with more than twelve monks, a situation like Monte Cassino rather than Subiaco. The Rule also seems to envisage different places and climates outside Italy, thereby leading most to believe that

the Rule was intended to be a single rule for any Western monastery.

The question of papal backing has also been brought up. The pope Hormisdas was supposedly looking for someone to write such a codification. However, most Benedictine scholars seem to feel that Benedict, in writing the Rule, was simply fulfilling a divine mission ("as saints so often do").[34]

While Benedict used many of the fruits of his own experience in writing the Rule, in the last chapter he acknowledges other sources and refers the reader to them. The Rule was not meant to be all-inclusive:

> ...For what page or what passage of the divinely inspired books of the Old and the New Testament is not a most perfect rule for man's life? Or what book is there of the Holy Catholic Fathers that doth not proclaim this, that by a direct course we may come to our Creator? Also, what else are the Collations of the Fathers, their Institutes, their Lives, and the Rule of our Holy Father St. Basil, but examples of the virtues, of the good living and obedience of monks?
>
> Rule, c. 73

There are also contained in the Rule references to Saints Anthony, Pachomius, Leo, and Jerome, Rufinus' History of the Monks, the Sentences of the Egyptian Fathers (particularly Cassian), and the Rules of Basil and Caesarius. Quotes from the Scriptures enter the text quite naturally, and Benedict seems partial to Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiasticus. St. Matthew is the most frequently quoted of the Gospels. For a man whose education was rudely interrupted, Benedict demonstrates more than a passing knowledge of the Bible, monastic literature, and letters of the Saints.[35]

Benedict's writing style in the Rule is extremely uneven. Translators tend to comment on the imbalance of his sentences as

he jumps from poetic to legal phraseology. The Rule deviates from classical Latin grammar and syntax, but this can probably also be attributed to Benedict's lack of academic training. Despite these technicalities, the style is direct and simple, further complimenting the nature of the work. The saint also interjected some humor in the Rule.[36] He did not forget he was dealing with humans and their shortcomings--his chapters on dealing with the excuses of drawsy monks (Rule, c. 22), and wine drinking in the monastery (Rule, c. 40) are priceless.

Due to the length limitations on this paper, it is not feasible to go into all aspects of the Rule. Those dealing with daily life in the monastery will be discussed in the last section. I would like to devote attention here to those items which stand out as the most important concepts and help to make the Rule different from all its predecessors, namely: the position of the abbot, the importance of the family influence, asceticism, and penance, stability, obedience, chastity, and, poverty.

The abbot is viewed as the cornerstone of the monastery. Just as Roman law gave the father a large authority over members of his household, the abbot also has paramount authority over the monastery. He must exercise that authority, however, according to the laws of God and the Rule. He is elected by the members of the community, and has the responsibility (to God) of looking after all the physical and spiritual needs of his flock. In turn, the monks must follow the aboot's every command with total obedience. The abbot's life is to serve as a shining example of the perfect Christian life, teaching the monks humility and charity through deed rather than precept.

"An abbot to be fit to rule a monastery should ever remember what he is called, and in his acts illustrate his high calling. For in a monastery, he is considered to take the place of Christ...." (Rule, c. 2).

The abbot's leadership is not to become a dictatorship or wrapped up in the "fussiness" of bureaucracy. Benedict suggests that the abbot summon the community to advise him, although he does not have to heed their advice. The abbot personally selects the other officials, always remembering to choose those who will benefit the community the most. Yet there exists the warning not to become embroiled in such petty temporal matters. Despite the abbot's position as a father/leader, he must also follow the Rule just like his brethren and give of himself totally to God.[37]

The abbot must mingle severity with his gentleness in regard to discipline, as he is both the rigorous master and the loving father. "He must reprove the undisciplined and restless severely, but he should exhort such as are obedient, quiet, and patient, for their better profit." (Rule, c. 2). He is allowed to apply corporal punishment in extreme cases becuase the Bible says "Strike they son with a rod and thou shalt deliver his soul from death" (Proverbs 23.14). The abbot can deliver four kinds of punishment, depending on the severity of the case: a verbal rebuke, corporal punishment (small act of himiliation), spiritual punishment (excommunication from a single aspect of daily life), and full excommunication. The fourth punishment is the most severe since it banishes one completely from the family community.[38]

Equally important to the paternal leadership of the abbot

is the emphasis of the Rule of the corporate nature of the monastic family. This cenobetic idea takes the emphasis off "rivalry, party spirit, and petty tyranny."[39] As a religious community, the Benedictine family follows a mutually-shared vocation, that of following the serving of Christ. Each monk renounces his self-will freely and lives by the judgment and command of God, the Rule, and the abbot. He dwells with his brothers in harmony, obedience, and submission--what affects one, affects the whole. While there is obedient respect for the abbot and other officials, mutual courtesy must be shown to all ranks.

Every activity is to be performed with the "simplicity of a large family at work." The community is self-sufficient, and independent with no outside interests, save helping neighbors and travelers materially and spiritually; their fundamental purpose is to serve God and "sanctify their souls apart from the world." The "cement" which binds the family together is obedience, defined by Benedict as "swift, uncritical, voluntary" (Rule, c. 5, 7). He feels that the right ordering of a community in the spiritual sense will automatically establish the proper social order, and the family/community idea seems to develop naturally from this philosophy.[40]

Benedict apparently associated extreme asceticism with the degeneration characteristic of his period. While there is some fasting and watching, all forms of penance have to be approved by the abbot. "Let all things be done in moderation" (Rule, c. 48) and "If thou be God's servant, let the chain of Christ and not any chain of iron, hold thee" (Rule, c.46).

The life of a Benedictine was not overly austere--the

typical life of a peasant at this time was just as difficult. Obediently following the rigors of an ordered daily life, and denying one's self-will in deference to the community will, seemed penitential enough to Benedict. Furthermore, a monk had to be of sound mind and body to carry out the Holy Service and sucessfully complete each day's manual labor. Extreme penitence could endanger his ability to perform these duties by damaging his health.

> Promitto coram Deo et sancti eius stabilitatem et conversionem morum et obedientiuam secundum Regulam sancti Patris Benedicti.
>
> "In the presence of God and of His Saints,,I promise stability and obedience according to the Rule of the holy Father Benedict." [41]

Stability and obedience were the two qualities which Benedict felt were necessary to keep the cenobitic family alive. A monk's stability must be absolute, "Even unto death." This includes both the mental stability necessary to follow the monastic precepts of the Benedictine order, and the physical stability which demands that a monk stay in the same monastery of his profession for an entire lifetime.[42]

Obedience proves to be the most important phase of the Rule because it touches all aspects of Benedictine life:

> The first degree of humility is prompt obedience. This is required of all who, whether by reason of the holy servitude to which they are pledged, or through fear of hell, or to attain to the glory of eternal life, hold nothing more dear than Christ. Such disciples delay not in doing what is ordered by their superior, just as if the command had come from God..... For this reason such disciples surrendering forth with all they possess, and giving up their own will, leave unfinished what they are working at, and with the ready foot of obedience in their acts flow the word of command ....they live not as they themselves will, neither do

> they obey their own desires and pleasures, but following the command and direction of another and abiding in their monasteries, their desire is to be ruled by an abbot.
>
> Rule, c. 5

This obedience entails the renunciation of one's free will for the command of a higher authority in order to make oneself more pleasing to God. It is to be both external and internal because God sees the murmurings of both the mouth and the heart. Once self-will is renounced, a monk must follow the commands of the abbot as long as they are in accord with Scripture and the Rule. In the fullest sense, obedience to God is simply giving back a very minute portion of what Christ gave to mankind. Obedience appears as a totally new feature in monastic life. Combined with lifelong stability, obedience makes the monastic life an occupation, not just another religious observance.[43]

Whereas St. Francis made poverty the whole of monastic life (and in the Rule, c. 33, Benedict forbids any monk to possess anything as his own), the Benedictine monastery is not to be "despoiled." All goods are communally used, and any wealth that is obtained through gifts or labor is given away for the welfare of society. Under Benedict, poverty became a social virtue.

Chastity, as a form of penance, shows a monk to be in complete union with God. It serves to purify the "emotions, reflections, and love" of each monk. Such an attachment to God should "more than suffice to turn him the monk away from the fickle affections of the world."[44]

In the Prologue, Benedict states that progress in the Christian life is effected by the practice of good works and

the constant exercise of all the virtues. Both chapter 4 ("The Instruments of Good Works") and chapter 7 ("On Humility") of the Rule seem to exemplify most of the good works and virtues Benedict speaks of. Both these chapters are included in the appendix.

The Rule of Saint Benedict is a skillfull combination of scriptural and doctrinal law, austerity tempered and enforced by moderation, stability and obedience, and a unique appreciation of the human character as it searches for its own perfection through God. The Rule came at a time when men craved law as a safeguard against a decaying society, church, and state. It reformed Western monasticism into a powerful, yet peaceful, force which would spread culture and Christianity all over Europe during the Middle Ages.

The monastery at Monte Cassino, as viewed by the Rule, could stand by itself, both economically and constitutionally. It had, within its own walled-off community, sufficient food and provisions for all inhabitants, as well as an organized hierarchical structure which provided administrative soundness. The Benedictine monastery could exist amidst the Barbarian attacks, warding off all blows except that of total destruction.[45]

The walled community atop Cassino was apparently not very large, although the Rule could easily accomodate at least one hundred monks. Being built into the mountain in the rubble of an ancient temple would naturally mean it was constructed of stone. The monastery building itself, consisted of the dormitory, oratory, refectory, library, and work/reading rooms. Offices, outhouses, and tool sheds surrounded the main building at a short distance. The kitchens, guesthouses, and the novices' dormitory were also usually separate from the main building. All buildings were constructed and maintained by the brethren. Wooden shingles and benches, as well as ceramic tiles for the walls and floors, were handcrafted on the premises.[46]

Life at Monte Cassino was simple, but not noted for its destitution. The monks possessed nothing of their own, but the Rule states, "all that is necessary they may hope to receive from the father of the monastery" (c. 33). They were provided with a sufficient amount of nourishing food, plus a pint of wine, they were allowed to sleep seven to nine hours nightly, their clothes were plain but not ragged or poorly fitted, and they were encouraged to maintain good personal hygiene. Silence was the general rule, but it could be broken occasionally.[47]

The daily horarium provided for four hours of liturgical prayer in the oratory, four hours of thoughtful spiritual reading and personal prayer/meditation, and six hours of some kind of manual or domestic work. Labor was not performed simply for labor's sake, even though it was necessary to ward off idleness, for physical exercise, and to provide for the upkeep of the monastic property. Labor was also regarded as a form of contemplative prayer which combined humility, obedience, and stability.

The monks slept together in one long dormitory, lit by a single candle throughout the night.[48] Their bedding consisted of a straw mattress, a coverlet, a blanket, and a pillow. They slept fully-clothed, with the exception of their knives. The signal for the night office of Vigils (commonly known as "knock-up") came at 2:30, and all were to rise "swiftly and silently" and process to the oratory.

Vigils began with the nocturn Deus in adjutorium, the Gloria Patri, another nocturn (repeated three times), followed by the third and ninety-fourth psalms, with antiphon sung between each of the verses of both psalms. A hymn concluded the office. The two nocturns, which composed the majority of the service, both had six psalms apiece, complete with antiphons. The reading of three lessons was placed after the first nocturn along with the Gloria Patri. After each of these lessons, the choir sang a responsory and the abbot blessed each reader. The second nocturn ended with a lesson from St. Paul and a series of prayers sung in litany form. The entire choir office, as it can be seen from a description of only one part, played an integral part of daily life. It was the Opus Dei, or "work of God" that

was the monks' first duty, "to which nothing is to be preferred" (Rule, c. 43).

Because the choir office could not be performed without some study, this becomes the purpose of the hour following Vigils. This period was spent in meditatio, learning by heart the psalms and lessons for the offices. Those who were fully-trained could read or pray during this time.

The next office was performed for a half an hour at daybreak, and this was called Matins. It also began with Deus in adjutorium, the sixty-sixth psalm (without antiphons), three chosen psalms (all with antiphons), and a canticle from the Old Testament. This was followed by the last three hymns of the Psalter (Laudes), a short biblical lesson and responsory, the canticle Benedictus, and prayers of the litany.

The following three hours were spent in lectio divina, or the study of the Holy Scriptures and works of the Fathers of the Church. More than the simple memorization of meditatio, lectio divina formed the intellectual background necessary for a life devoted to the monastic tradition. The reading period was interrupted for twenty minutes at sunrise for the office of Prime. This one is quite simple consisting of Deus in adjutorium, a hymn, three psalsm (with antiphons), and a concluding prayer. The offices of Terce, Sext, and None were identical to Prime.

At 8:30, after Terce, the brothers engaged in some form of manual labor. There is some question as to what kind of work they performed--several historians believe that Monte Cassino hired local workers to perform the agricultural and handicraft skills, while the monks practiced more spiritual pursuits.

However, in chapter 48 of the Rule, it is written, "Idleness is an enemy of the soul; and hence at certain seasons the brethren are to occupy themselves in the labor of their hands, and at others in holy reading." This chapter did not paint labor as a contemptible activity. It was a necessary one "to aid in forming a simple life without oppressive poverty."[49] Those who were proficient in a craft such as carpentry, milling, baking, or weaving, were allowed to supply their goods to the monastic community as part of their manual labor. Other officials like the cellarer, novice master, guest master, and infirmarian did the cooking, and caring for the novices, the guests, the sick, and the poor.[50]

At mid-day, Sext was said, and None was said at 2:30 when work was completed. Following None, the monks gathered in the refectory for their one meal of the day. The meal was taken in silence ("Death and life are in the power of the tongue." Rule, c. 6), but it was accompanied by a reading by a selected brother. Chapters 39 and 40 of the Rule provide for two cooked dishes (thus allowing a choice), accompanied by fruits and vegetables, a pound of bread, and a pint of wine. Flesh meat was not allowed except for the invalids.

After the meal, the monks returned to their reading until 4:15, at which time Vespers was sung. The office loosely resembled Matins, however, only four psalms were sung, and the Magnificat replaced the Benedictus. There was some free time between Vespers and the dusk office of Compline; this short period is regarded as an informal period when silence could be broken.

Compline consisted of three psalms, a hymn of Compline, and

the chapter collect. It is interesting to note that the vocal volume of the offices corresponded with the "symbolism of light." In the process of a day, prayer music would gradually rise from decrescendo to crescendo and back to decrescendo at Compline. Morning offices were modeled after the Resurrection and were more joyous, while evening offices tended to be quite solemn with their relation to the Crucifixion.[51]

Following Compline, the monks returned to the dormitory for another night's sleep, with the same daily regime ahead of them. During the summer, the monks received less sleep at night, but were compensated for the loss by a short siesta after the meal.

One will notice that nowhere in this schedule is there mention of a mass. Not until the Middle Ages did choir monks become priests, and only then did mass become a daily practice. During Benedict's time, a crude mass was given on infrequent occasions by a specially ordained priest. The absence of priests was not unusual at this time--Benedict himself is said only to have been a deacon.[52]

The fact that a portion of the day was directed toward study would indicate the presence of a sizeable library. Because most of the study took the form of reading, literacy rates were astounding, and this served to foster a high intellectual level in the monastery. Each monk did at least 1400 hours of studying annually, and the Rule states that each monk will receive one book at Lent to study and then put toward communal use. Put these together with the daily readings during the offices and the meals, and it is not surprising to estimate a sizable library for the times (one historian has figured the size between one and two thousand volumes!).[53]

This life, compared to that of a "father of the desert" seems much too lax and uncomplicated, yet it is more in keeping with the potential of the normal human being. It takes into consideration man's strengths and weaknesses and works a suitable plan around them. The Rule shows both moderation and discretion, yet the simplistic, rigorous, and penitential elements still remain. By following the Rule, all aspects of each day are pointed in the same direction, toward attaining a more perfect love of God--this love enters the active and contemplative life and transcends both.[54]

St. Benedict had extremely modest intentions concerning the formation of his order. In fact, it can even be speculated upon whether or not he even meant to found such a universal entity since the strength of Benedictine monasticism has always been placed in the individual abbey. The Benedictines were not created to offer some specific function or service; their purpose lay in the structure of the Rule, which directed daily life toward the service of God.

Shortly after Benedict's death, the character of Monte Cassino changed somewhat. During his tenure as abbot, Benedict had allowed no study of secular literature, and was intent on not allowing the monks to even leave the walls of the monastery in order to teach and/or convert. His successors did not follow these stringent policies, and Western Europe remains in their debt. After the destruction of Monte Cassino by the Lombards, the Benedictines were forced to flee back to Rome. Gregory involved them in his missionary plans, and the Benedictines made major advances in this field. They took with them the remains of classical temporal and religious culture, and applied these remains as they converted heathen areas of Europe.

The Benedictines would again be involved with monastic reform due to the impetus of the Cluniacs. Although Cluny did not remain truly faithful to the spirit of the Rule, their devotion to the welfare of Christianity mirrors the original ideas of the order's founder.

Despite the humble origins of Benedictine order, it continued to grow and flourish. Without the Benedictine influence, Western Europe might have developed quite differently.

In the work of Benedict, we see the fulfillment of the promise, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His justice, and all these things shall be added unto you." The simple pursuit of service to God became a foundation for modern civilization through the words of The Rule of Saint Benedict.

FOOTNOTES

[1]T.F.Lindsay, St. Benedict (London: Burns Cates, 1949), pp. 1-2.

[2]Ibid., p. 157.

[3]David Knowles, Christian Monasticism (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1969), p. 34.

[4]Lowrie J. Daly, Benedictine Monasticism (New York: Sheen and Ward, 1965), p. 93; Lindsay, St. Benedict, pp. 1-2.

[5]Lindsay, St. Benedict, p. 4.

[6]Gregory the Great, Dialogues, book II, trans. Odo John Zimmerman (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1959), Prologue Hereafter, all references to book II of the Dialogues will be cited in the body of the text as Dialogue II, c. ---.

[7]Alban Butler, Butler's Lives of the Saints, vol. 1 (New York: P.J.Kennedy & Sons, 1956), p. 650.

[8]Saint Benedict, The Rule of Saint Benedict, trans. with an introduction by Cardinal Gasquet (London: Chatto & Windus, 1936), xv-xvi. Hereafter, all references to the actual text of the Rule will be cited in the body of this paper as Rule, c. ---. The title Rule will not be underlined in the body except when cited after a quotation.

[9]Justin McCann, Saint Benedict (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1958), pp. 43-46.

[10]Marshall W. Baldwin, Christianity Through the Thirteenth Century (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 68-69.

[11]Lindsay, St. Benedict, p. 154.

[12]Benedict, Rule, p. xvii.

[13]Lindsay, St. Benedict, pp. 51, 53.

[14]Ibid., p. 155.

[15]Edouard Sneider, The Benedictines (New York: Greenberg Publishers, 1926), p. 6; McCann, St. Benedict, p. 17.

[16]McCann, St. Benedict, pp. 30-31.

[17]Ibid., p. 33.

[18]Lindsay, St. Benedict, pp. 146-147.

[19]Daly, Benedictine Monasticism, p. 72; Lindsay, St. Benedict, p. 22.

[20]Lindsay, St. Benedict, p. 55; Daly, Benedictine Monasticism, p. 76.

[21]McCann, St. Benedict, pp. 47-56.

[22]Ibid., pp. 50-51.

[23]Ibid., p. 55.

[24]Cuthbert Butler, Benedictine Monachism (London: Longman's 1924), p. 32.

[25]John Chapman, St. Benedict and the Sixth Century (New York: Sheen and Ward, 1929), p. 47.

[26]Daly, Benedictine Monasticism, p. 77.

[27]Butler, Lives, pp. 650-655; Lindsay, St. Benedict, p. 154.

[28]Benedict, Rule, p. ix.

[29]Knowles, Christian Monasticism, p. 34.

[30]Lindsay, St, Benedict, pp. 157, 187.

[31]Daly, Benedictine Monasticism, p. 92.

[32]Knowles, Christian Monasticism, p. 37.

[33]McCann, St. Benedict, pp. 103-104.

[34]Lindsay, St. Benedict, pp. 133-138.

[35]Schneider, The Benedictines, p. 44; Lindsay, St. Benedict, p. 149.

[36]Lindsay, St. Benedict, p. 153.

[37]Ibid., pp. 141-144.

[38]Daly, Benedictine Monasticism, p. 87.

[39]Lindsay, St. Benedict, p. 155.

[40]Daly, Benedictine Monasticism, p. 88; Lindsay, St. Benedict, p. 155.

[41]Schneider, The Benedictines, pp. 204-205.

[42]Ibid.

[43]Benedict, Rule, p. xviii.

[44]Schneider, The Benedictines, pp. 206-209.

[45]Daly, Benedictine Monasticism, p. 93.

[46]Knowles, Christian Monasticism, p. 35.

[47]Lindsay, St. Benedict, p. 154.

[48]Daly, Benedictine Monasticism, pp. 79-81; Lindsay, St. Benedict, pp. 117-127. All monastic description is taken from these two sources. Any deviation will be cited.

[49]Daly, Benedictine Monasticism, pp. 89, 144.

[50]Lindsay, St. Benedict, pp. 121-123, 129-131; McCann, St. Benedict, p. 103.

[51]Chapman, St. Benedict and the 6th Century, pp. 142-143.

[52]Lindsay, St. Benedict, p. 127.

[53]Chapman, St. Bnendict and the 6th Century, p. 145; Lindsay, St. Benedict, p. 131.

[54]McCann, St. Benedict, p. 134.

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McCann, Justin. Saint Benedict: The Story of the Man and His Work. New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1958.

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Baldwin, Marshall. Christianity Through the Thirteenth Century.

The only importance of this text to the paper is that it was here that I first learned about the Rule. It has some of the more important excerpts from the Rule, and a short introduction before the text.

Butler, Alban. Butler's Lives of the Saints.

This four volume set is simply a listing of the personal histories of all the Catholic saints, arranged chronilogically according to saints' days throughout the calendar year. It was useful to me when beginning my research so that I could get a general overview of Benedict's life. There are no value judgments of any sort, simply a listing of historical facts containing each personality.

Butler, Cuthbert. Christian Monachism.

I finally tracked this book down in the Library of Congress toward the end of my research period. Unfortunately it was too late to use extensively, but I noticed that while skimming the book, this work has been used quite substantially by many other scholars dealing with St. Benedict.

Chapman, John. St. Benedict and the Sixth Century.

As was the case with Butler's Christian Monachism, this series of essays was found too late, but was used just as heavily by Benedictine scholars. Chapman, I feel, over-emphasizes the direct contributions of Benedict during his own day. Granted that the saint was know for his miracles, but the impact of the Rule and the Benedictine order are probably the greatest in the period after Benedict's life at Monte Cassino.

Daly, Lowrie. Benedictine Monasticism.

This book was extremely interesting since it paid very close attention to the minute details of Benedictine life. Written by a Jesuit, Benedictine Monasticism is not shrouded with Benedictine "apologies." The realities of monastic life are brought out here and life at Monte Cassino is put in a proper perspective with secular circumstances of the time. Above all, Father Daly demonstrates Benedictine involvement in, and contributions to, virtually every significant aspect of historical development in early modern Europe. The book

goes much further than the time span I dealt with, but it was extremely valuable in giving a more realistic picture of monastic life.

Knowles, David. Christian Monasticism.

This book was very interesting as it traces the evolution of the central monastic tradition from the Near East into the Middle Ages in Europe. It was useful in showing how Benedict incorporated some ancient monastic practices into the Rule. Knowles believes the Rule was a Godsend in the midst of chaos and turmoil of barbaric upheaval. The book reads like a text, but was helpful in showing how the East influenced Benedict, and how Benedict then in turn influenced Western monastic practices.

Lindsay, T.J. Saint Benedict.

Lindsay was my favorite reference to use, since it was very clear and detailed, and there was little judgment on, or religious apology for, the work of Benedict. It follows his life from Nursia to Monte Cassino in detail. Lindsay was not a great religious scholar, and he has left out a great deal which would be interesting to members of the Benedictine order; things that are often confusing to the general lay reader. Linday felt that St. Benedict was "a great figure intthe portrait gallery of Europe," and it is as such that he has tried to view him. The reader is left to form his own opinions on the intrinsic value of Benedict's legend. Due to the absence of a religious bias, Lindsay's work is refreshing to use in research.

McCann, Justin. Saint Benedict.

This is the "official" biography of St. Benedict. While being well written, it can be rather overbearing--you have to wade through the obvious bias in order to get a good picture of the saint. While I enjoyed the Lindsay biography more, McCann's was useful because he does go into some psychological aspects of the effects of monasticism on the common man, and how the Benedictine code was useful, not only as a religious law but as influential on civil law as well.

Sneider, Edouard. The Benedictines.

Sneider's book, very short and simple, had an interesting part that was useful in understanding the daily schedule of the Benedictines. The author, a layman, spent several days in a monastery observing the rituals. At points, he becomes side-tracked recounting the spiritual ecstacy he felt during certain prayers, etc., but it was interesting to have a first hand account of what it was actually like to be in a cell, in the refectory, and to follow a detailed summary of "one day in a Benedicitine monastery."